

Editorial

Crime board's work not just stats

The Memphis Shelby Crime Commission Monday sent a signal that it is involved in the fight to reduce crime beyond producing monthly statistics detailing how well that battle is progressing.

The commission announced it issued a privately funded, \$6.1 million grant to the city of Memphis directed at recruitment and retention of police officers.

In addition to the grant money, to be used over a four-year period for bonuses, Memphis Mayor Jim Strickland announced his budget proposal to the City Council will include 1 percent and 2 percent raises, and additional bonuses for officers based on years of experience.

The Crime Commission grant is a drop in the bucket when compared to the financial resources the city needs to replenish the Police Department's complement of police officers, many of whom decided to leave after the city cut employee and retiree benefits in 2014.

Still, the grant announcement is an important, if symbolic, acknowledgment of the seriousness of the city's violent crime problem. There is a feeling in some circles that the violent crime spike is tied to the loss of some 500 officers.

The city will use the grant money to offer officers with three to 11 years on the force a retention bonus ranging from \$6,400 to \$7,000 over four years if they commit to staying in Memphis for that time. Any officer would receive a \$2,000 bonus through the grant if they refer a candidate to the Memphis Police Training Academy and that candidate graduates and joins the department.

The mayor proposes to use public dollars to give officers with at least 12 years on the force a 2 percent pay increase in the 2017-18 budget. They also would receive a one-time \$1,600 bonus. Officers with 11 years or less on the force would receive a 1 percent raise in the proposed budget. The total impact to the budget would be \$4.4 million.

It is not surprising that Memphis Police Association officials turned a cold shoulder to the announcements. MPA President Michael Williams reiterated

While the cuts were painful, the Commercial Appeal supported them because the city was facing a critical debt problem. With the state comptroller breathing down the city's neck because the city's revenue stream was inadequate to handle the debt, the City Council voted to approve then-mayor A C Wharton's plan to cut benefits. Strickland was among the seven council members who approved the cuts. The cuts ignited an exodus of police officers.

While somewhat abated, the city still has a pension indebtedness issue that, according to state law, has to be resolved by 2020. Madden said restoring health care benefits to 2014 levels for officers would require a 35- to 50-cent property tax increase — and the pension debt issue still would be unresolved.

We give the Crime Commission a thumbs up for stepping forward with the \$6.1 million grant — along with Strickland's pay hike and additional bonuses proposal — to try to stop the bleeding away of police officers that, to quote McGruff the crime dog, could take a bite out of crime.

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LOUIS GRAHAM
EDITOR

JEROME WRIGHT
EDITORIAL PAGE
EDITOR

Contact Jerome Wright
at 901-529-5830 or
jerome.wright@commercialappeal.com

Today's Bible verse

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things. Philippians 4:8

Doonesbury Garry Trudeau

